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ABSTRACT

Student development has become a buzz word within the student affairs profession and the concept of student development has become the guiding paradigm of the student affairs profession. Unfortunately, this embracing of student development lacked the necessary critique or debate essential to academics. This digest provides an abstract of a major critique of student development theories in an effort to stimulate discussion and debate on this issue. The student development model is examined: in relation to its adequacy in the areas of philosophy; as a theoretical base; as a research base; as a body of literature; and as a guide for practice. The model was found to possess many inadequacies in these foregoing areas and student affairs professionals are advised to reevaluate the model's applicability. Even as a guiding paradigm for the profession, the model is found to be lacking. It is suggested that the profession return to its historical and philosophical roots and build and innovate from there. It is hoped that this digest will stimulate the debate and analysis necessary to address the limitations of the current student development model. (RJM)

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by Russell R. Rogers, Ph.D.

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

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Reform in Student Affairs: A Synopsis

Russell R. Rogers, Ph.D.

Overview

In recent years, student development has become a buzz word within the student affairs profession. Student development theories have been touted on college campuses; student affairs staff have claimed the development of students as their unique expertise; and the journal of one of the profession's major associations has changed its name to the *Journal of Student Development*. In short, the concept of student development has become the guiding paradigm of the student affairs profession—one that seems to have been embraced by its members wholeheartedly.

Unfortunately, however, this embracing of student development largely has occurred without the critique or debate considered essential within the "sifting and winnowing" of the academic enterprise. In 1994, Bloland, Stamatakos and Rogers provided the first comprehensive critique of the student development model, a monograph entitled, *Reform in Student Affairs: A Critique of Student Development*. This digest is intended to provide an abstract of those authors' major arguments and conclusions and thereby to stimulate continued discussion and debate regarding the issue. To this end, the student development model will be examined in relation to its adequacy in the following major areas: as a philosophy, a theoretical base, a research base, a body of literature, and a guide for practice. The digest will then conclude with a suggested paradigm that is more congruent with the mission of higher education.

A Critique of the Student Development Model

To determine the adequacy of student development as a guide for the student affairs profession, the concept of student development, as delineated in "Student Development Services in Post-Secondary Education" (COSPA, 1975), was compared with the earlier *Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1949) and also with the four components of a professional philosophy: basic principles, values, roles and functions, and identity. The earlier work of Stamatakos and Rogers (1984) formed the basis for this comparison. Results indicated that as a guiding philosophy for student affairs, student development is both deficient and inadequate. Specifically, student development, as described in the COSPA document (1975), disregards the mission, goals, and roles of higher education as well as the relationship of higher education to society as a whole. In addition, student development touts an inherent value system that not only views the development of students as an end in itself, but one that is seemingly accomplishable apart from the college curriculum. Other limitations of student development as a philosophy include its failure to acknowledge the field's rich heritage, and also its disregard for the learnings that are deemed essential to successful student affairs practice (e.g., an understanding of learning theory and the philosophy of higher education).

In relation to the adequacy of student development as a theoretical basis for student affairs, student development theory was examined relative to six criteria for effective theory: logical coherence, generalizability, testability, significance, contribution to understanding, and simplicity (Gergen, 1969). Once again, in relation to all six criteria, student development was found to be inadequate. Of particular concern was the fact that student affairs has no single student development theory or meta-theory, but rather a number of individual theoretical perspectives addressing development in particular areas. Thus, theories tend to be selected on a campus-by-campus or professional-by-professional basis giving rise to the accusation that choices among theories are arbitrary rather than based on sound theoretical principles.

The adequacy of the research base for student development was examined in relation to three specific areas: the effectiveness of theory-based interventions, the types of research designs employed, and the nature and quality of the research conducted. This analysis expanded on the earlier work of Thrasher and Bloland (1989) and identified a number of methodological limitations including differential treatment of sample populations, selection bias, insufficient time in treatment, and inadequate use of control groups. In addition, few, if any, qualitative studies, comprehensive literature reviews, or meta-analyses were found. Perhaps more problematic, however, is that little work has been done to validate currently accepted theories or to generate new theories that are applicable to today's diverse student populations.

An appraisal of the literature on student development also revealed a number of concerns. First, given the proclaimed commitment of the field to the student development model, the number of articles with a specific student development focus is small in comparison to the total number of published articles. Further, the literature is primarily anecdotal in nature, promotes theories that are complex and unsubstantiated, and incorporates little in terms of educational philosophy or learning theory. In short, the literature contains very little material that is useful to typical student affairs practitioners.

Lastly, the ideal relationship between theory and practice was examined and then evaluated against the student development model and its theory-base. Once again, a number of problems were identified. First, although the student development model was expected to provide the profession with a basis upon which to claim expertise regarding students, little supportive evidence was found. The application of theory to practice seems to be limited by several factors: an overabundance of theories; the diversity in educational backgrounds of practitioners as well as their pragmatic, even anti-theory, bias; the prescriptive use of descriptive theories; and the tendency toward bandwagon claims regarding the benefits of theory.

A Reappraisal of the Role of Student Affairs

Given the inadequacy of the prevailing student development model relative to philosophy, theory, research-base, literature-base and practical application, the student affairs profession would do well to reevaluate its current and future direction. Bloland, et al. (1994) contend that what is needed is a refocusing on the central mission of higher education. In this context, student affairs professionals would take their cues from the educational mission unique to their employing institution and seek to make a contribution to that mission as an educational force in the co-curriculum and, also where feasible, within academic programs.

Such a redirection of the student affairs profession would have profound implications for the field as a whole as well as for its conferences, professional preparation programs, and the ongoing professional development of its practitioners. While specific recommendations in each of these areas is beyond the scope of this digest, Bloland et al. (1994) recommend that individual practitioners, campus student affairs organizations, and national professional associations explore the following recommendations as they consider the future mission of student affairs in higher education:

1. Cease identifying primarily with the student development model as the philosophical underpinning of the field;

2. Return to the principles so clearly expressed in the Student Personnel Point of View (ACE, 1949) that place academic and intellectual development as student affairs' central mission;

3. Re-emphasize the primacy of learning as the core value of higher education and employ both learning and student development theories in planning programs to enhance the learning process;

4. Identify with the educational mission of the host institution. Apart from this mission, student affairs has no function other than the provision of support services for students; and,

5. Seek out ways to participate more fully in the academic life of the host institution, identifying the distinct contribution that student affairs makes in maximizing the institution's educational purpose.

Conclusion

It is time for the student affairs profession to reconsider the student development model it has espoused for the past twenty years. As a guiding paradigm for the profession, the model is found to be lacking. It is inadequate as a philosophy, a theoretical framework, a body of literature and also as a basis for practice. As an alternative, the field would do well to return to its historical and philosophical roots and build and innovate from there. Barring such a return, however, it is hoped that this digest and the larger work it represents will stimulate the debate and analysis necessary to address the limitations of the current student development model and open the way to revitalize the field as it faces the challenges and opportunities at hand.

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